DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 280 988 CE 046 781

AUTHOR Ming, Cheng Kai
TITLE A Move against the Traditions: Vocationalising Secondary Education in China.
INSTITUTION London Univ. (England). Inst. of Education.
PUB DATE May 86
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Vocationalising Education Conference (London, England, May 7-9, 1986).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Change; *Educational History; Educational Needs; *Educational Trends; Foreign Countries; Government Role; Labor Needs; Secondary Education; Technical Education; *Vocational Education; *Vocational High Schools
IDENTIFIERS *China

ABSTRACT

Traditionally, the majority of high school graduates in China go to academic high schools; however, only about seven percent of them are able to go on to higher education, and some become unemployed. Beginning in 1980, reforms in the education system have created vocational high schools, which, unlike traditional vocational high schools, prepare graduates for a field, but not for a guaranteed job. Due especially to the opening of many vocational high schools, the ratio of secondary students going into vocational versus academic education has changed to 60:40. The vocational high schools run their programs in conjunction with companies that wish to hire the graduates; for example, Hilton Hotels provide equipment and internships for hotel management students in Shanghai. The vocational high schools also stress entrepreneurship, which has been recognized by the state as a means to reduce unemployment and foster economic development. These schools lessen the examination pressures on academic high school students, so that a higher percentage--about 40 to 50 percent--are now able to go on to higher education. Although these examples may not be generalizable to the whole country of China, the vocationalization of Chinese secondary schools represents a great change from previous thinking in that planned economy. (KC)

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ED280988

University of London Institute of Education
Department of International and Comparative Education

VOCATIONALISING EDUCATION CONFERENCE

7-9 May, 1986

A MOVE AGAINST THE TRADITIONS:
VOCATIONALIZING SECONDARY EDUCATION IN CHINA

Cheng Kai Ming

Department of Education, University of Hong Kong

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Cheng Kai Ming

Department of Education
University of Hong Kong

Paper prepaed for the International Conference on
"Vocationalizing Education"
Organized by the
Department of International and Comparative Education
University of London Institute of Education
May 6-9, 1986
London

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Introduction

In May 1985, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China issued a document which called for a restructuring of the education system (Reform, 1985). One of the major areas [1] of reform was vocationalizing secondary education, so that the general:vocational ratio at senior secondary level would change from the then 7:3 to a target of 5:5 in five years' time (Ibid.:11).

This paper attempts to delineate the background and implications of this vocationalization and to analyse some of the most noteworthy issues in this reform.

As I have said in almost all my papers on Chinese education, three points need to be borne in mind. Firstly, China is a vast country. What is observed in one or two places can hardly be generalised to other places in the country. Secondly, China is changing rapidly; what is true today may soon become obsolete in a few months' time. Thirdly, China is a distinctive culture. Much of what is happening in China can be understood only from an ethnographic perspective.

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[1] The other major areas of reform include the laucnching of 9-years compulsory education, greater autonomy for higher education and the establishment of a cross-ministrial State Education Commission.

Information and analysis in this paper are based on visits and interviews made over the years, particularly interviews made in December, 1985 and March, 1986 with key informants from China, in Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing and Hong Kong. These key informants include academics, administrators and educational planners in the central and provincial governments. Interview sources of information are coded in the text.

Background of the Reform

One major concern of the reform was vocationalisation of education at the senior secondary level.

The Existing System

Chinese children used to start school at the age of seven. The recent legislation has lowered this to six (Wen Wei Pao, 1986). Primary schooling has just been changed from 5 years to 6 years, although a few schools still remain in the 5-year mode. The first three years of secondary schooling are referred to as *junior secondary* and the last three years *senior secondary*.

The vast majority of junior secondary schools are general schools with a common curriculum, although a very small number of vocational junior secondary schools are still around. The focus of attention is technical and vocational schools at senior secondary levels.

Without reference to the complicated systems and their changes before and during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the recent situation and development of senior secondary schooling is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of Senior Secondary Schools by Type
(Source: Jiaoyu Bu, 1985:21-22)

	1984 ('000)	% of total	84/83 Growth (%)
Secondary Specialized	811	7.7	17.8
Secondary Teacher Training	511	4.8	12.4
Craft Schools	639	6.0	21.7
Agricultural/ Vocational Senior	1,745	16.5	43.0
(Subtotal	*3,706*	*35.0*	*28.3)*
General Senior	6,898	65.0	9.7

By the end of 1985, general senior secondary schools constituted about 60% of the enrolment at equivalent level. They follow a core curriculum with equal emphasis given to arts and science subjects. Graduates of these schools normally sit for the Unified Higher Education Entrance Examination. Nationally, about 7% of these grduates are admitted by universities and higher institutions (Interview, G1, 1985). These general schools are run by educational *bureaux* in local governments.

Secondary specialized schools (*zhong-zhuan*) are technical schools designed to supply intermediate manpower (technicians). The secondary specialized schools are normally run by non-educational *bureaux* in local governments. Graduates of these specialized schools, after a certain period of work, may apply for entrance to higher specialized institutions at university level (Interview, W2, 1985). As a matter of fact, the secondary specialized schools admit senior secondary graduates more than junior secondary graduates, although the latter should be their target population.

Craft schools are vocational training institutions producing craftsmen. These are again run by different non-educaitonal bureaux and graduates directly enter employment. There is a similar "inflation of qualification" when primary graduates are supposed to be recruited but nearly all the students are junior secondary graduates.

Both specialized schools and craft schools have been established since 1949, with some discontinuity only during the curtural revolution.

The agricultural are vocational senior secondary schools (*nongye gaozhong* and *zhiye gaozhong*) are basically senior middle schools operating in the rural and urban areas respectively. They have a certain

proportion of the curriculum put aside for specialized vocational training, but they differ from the specialized schools and craft schools in (a) students may still sit for the higher education entrance examination and (b) graduates do not join the centralized job allocation scheme upon graduation. That is, the career future is still open.

It is, however, these agricultural/vocational senior secondary schools which are the new breed which emerged after the cultural revolution and have now become the main thrust in the reform to vocationalize secondary education.

Pressures for a Change

Pressures come from at least three directions for a restructuring of the secondary school system.

Firstly, there was widespread youth unemployment during the late 1970s and early 1980s. One solution to the unemployment, then known as "job-waiting" (*daiye*), was to allow self-employment. This was a crucial move in transforming the economic structure and the outcome has been extremely popular. Self-employment has prompted the emergence of a large number of vocational training facilities which do not allocate their graduates to jobs. These later gave rise to the vocational senior secondary schools which has grown most

rapidly in recent years (See Table 1). This tendency is further reinforced by the deliberate breaking down of many enterprises into smaller units.

Secondly, the continuous economic boom in the rural areas have changed the attitudes of the peasants towards education. In the first years of the rural economic reform, the return to education was negative, and children opted to drop out. With the further development in the rural economy, peasants turned more to economic crops, to commercial activities and, what is more often now, to contract construction projects in the cities. These have aroused a new need for vocational skills. Agricultural senior secondary schools have therefore become popular (Interviews W1, 1985; G1, 1985; 1986; W3, 1986).

Thirdly, pressure also comes from teachers and educators in general, that with the slim opportunity entering higher education, the vast majority of secondary students are doing a curriculum which is irrelavant and experiencing an examination pressure which is unnecessary. There has long been an outcry to diversify the school system, to divert students to non-academic stusies and to reduce the examination pressure.

These pressures have given rise to the expansion of all kinds of technical education and vocational training. In the following section, I shall further

illustrate the situation by concentrating on the vocational senior secondary schools in the urban areas. For the convenience of an international readership, I shall translate the *zhiye gaozhong* as the *vocational high school (VHS)*.

The Vocational High Schools: some basic facts

I shall take Shanghai, the largest industrialized city in China, as an example.

By the end of 1984, the general:vocational ratio in Shanghai at senior secondary level was 52.8:47.3 (Interview, Li, 1984). In one year's time, the ratio has changed to 40:60 at the end of 1985 (Interview, Li, 1986). The main thrust in the transformation is the rapid expansion of VHS's.

The General Situation

In the school year 1985-86, there are 249 schools operating vocational *classes* all over Shanghai. Not all these are totally vocational; many of these operate general and vocational classes in parallel (Interview, Fi, 1986). In urban Shanghai, for example, there are 42 VHS's. They operate 109 courses ranging from industrial, commercial, servicing to para-medical training (Shanghai, 1985). The most popular courses are tourism, accountancy and statistics, car driving, clothing and banking. In the urban area, around 70% of

the courses cater for the tertiary sector; this becomes 20% in rural areas (Interview, F1, 1986).

Most of the courses are of 3-year duration which matches the 3-year general senior secondary schooling. Some courses are of 4-year duration (examples are media communication and nursing) (Shanghai, 1985). Some of these 4-year courses prepare low-level managers. There are also exceptional 1-year or 2-year courses many of which recruit only senior secondary graduates (Ibid.)

Curriculum

All the courses in VHS's are occupationally tailor-made; in Chinese terms, they are employment-oriented (*dingxiang peiyang*, literally "training with a definite direction).

The structure of the curriculum in a VHS comprises basically half academic subjects and half vocational subjects. In practice, the proportions may vary from 60:40 to 40:60. The vocational subjects comprise both a theoretical and a practical component (Chen & Wei, 1984; Shanghai, 1985a).

Academic subjects usually include Politics, Chinese, Mathematics, English and some of the normal academic subjects such as Chemistry, Physics and History. Physical Education is a "must". They adopt textbooks that are nationally designed for the

specialized secondary schools (i.e. the traditional technical schools) (Ibid.). The required levels of mastery are normally a little lower than those in general secondary schools.

The vocational subjects are really diversified. There are, however, 'core' subjects such as Accountancy and Business Management for all commercial VHS classes and Toursist English and Tourist Goergraphy for all tourist VHS's classes. Computer studies are common in most VHS's (Ibid.) in Shanghai.

There are also very practical subjects such as electrical work, shopkeeping, shoe-making, cookery and so on.

Recruitment and Graduation

There is a unified municipal recruitment examination after completion of junior secondary schools. This examination allocates students to the four types of schools. Three subjects are exmamined: Chinese, mathematics and foreign language (Interview, F1, 1986).

Students who attend the VHS have to pay a token amount of tuition fees, 6 *Yuan* (Chinese Dollar) in this case. The major difference between the VHS's and the other types of technical/vocational schools is that in other technical/vocational schools, admission implies an

automatic allocation of a job upon graduation. This used to be the basic system in China as part of the rigid manpower planning.

What the VHS's practise is "appointment by merits" (*zeyou luyong*), that is, only qualified graduates will be recommended for employment. On the whole, 95% of the students all over Shanghai eventually pass and get jod recommendations (Interview, F1, 1986; W2, 1985). There are two implications of this practice: firstly, the students may not be given a job; secondly, the students may choose not to take up the job. Both of these present a marked deviation from the conventional job allocation system.

Sponsorship

Most of the VHS's are operating under some co-sponsorship, known as *guagou lianban* (hook-on joint-venture). In some cases, the whole school is a joint venture between the Education Bureau and, for example, the Bureau of Commerce in the local government. In other cases, the school is essentially administered by the Education Bureau, but the courses are co-sponsored by the Education Bureau and some industrial or commercial enterprise. In the latter cases, there can be different co-sponsors in different courses, even within one school.

In a VHS for tourism, for example, one may find courses named after "Hilton", meaning that the course is a joint venture between the Hilton Group and the Education Bureau. In other words, the Hilton Group commissioned the VHS to do training for its personnel. In this joint venture, the school provides the premises, and teachers and costs for the teaching of the academic subjects. The Hilton Group pays for the capital costs for the specific re-equipping and provides teachers or instructors for the practical subjects. The Hilton Group also provides opportunities for actual experiences in its hotels. Students who are recruited to these Hilton Courses are well informed that if they can pass the courses with satisfactory performance, they will be recruited into the Hilton Hotels. Students may also choose not to accept the job offer, but they seldom do so.

A Move Against Tradition

The VHS may present some interesting experience to the international scene, despite the fact that it occurs in a socialist setting. Some special features are described below.

Unemployment and Training

It would be misleading to say that unemployment in China in the late 1970s and early 1980s was eradicatated

by vocational training. However, it is safe to say that vocational training, and VHS in particular, has helped very much in improving the situation.

Many VHS's started in 1980 as experimental vocational classes in general secondary schools. 1980 was a crucial year because the State Committee issued in 1980 a Document which called for a restructuring of secondary education and expansion of vocational education (Guowu Yuan, 1980). The Document came at a time when the Central Government made a crucial decision to encourage self-employment.

Pei Kuan Middle School, which was a "banner" for "ideological education" during the cultural revolution, started in 1980 vocational training classes where the recruitees are entirely "job-waiting" youths who have completed *senior secondary schooling.* This soon became famous because 90% of the graduates immediately got jobs, either employed by some institution or self-employed (Visit and interview, L2, 1986).

This created significant impact upon structural unemployment which, in the China case, is due to the practice of rigid manpower planning rather than due to the institutional professionalization which is the case in Western Societies.

However, this remedy for unemployment soon subsided into a side effect when the allowance for self-employment has effectively created an unprecedented "job market" which presents considerable challenge to the planned economy. This "job market", although still marginal in the entire economy, has reciprocally prompted further expansion of the VHS which has become the sole supplier of marketable skilled manpower. In Shanghai (Interview F1), as well as in the Fujian province (Interview Z1), VHS training in clothing is particularly popular, because self-employed dress-makers move far ahead of large factories in chasing rapidly changing fashions.

In this sense, the VHS's play an important role in the economic reform. This role is further reinforced by a delegation of the manpower planning autonomy to local governments. In the Jiangsu province, for example, most of the large enterprises have been deliberately broken down into smaller enterprises which have far greater flexibility in their recruitment policies. This have created a tremendous demand for training by the VHS (Interview, M1, 1986; H2, 1986).

Caught in this tide, planners in the Central Government seem to feel happy about this non-planning situation (Interviews W1, 1985; X1, 1985; X2, 1985). In

fact, the specilaized secondary schools, i.e. the traditional technical schools, are now also moving away from guaranteed job allocation. They are also adopting the "appointment by merits" policy, although they do not operate any joint-ventures or commissioned training (Interview W2, 1985). In essence, in the specialized secondary schools, the employers are given a choice (via school assessment), but the students are not.

Demographic Drop, Conversion and Diversion

Many of the VHS's are conversions of general secondary schools. In the school year 1985-86, there are 95 converted VHS's in Shanghai. Among the 42 urban VHS's, 35 are converted. The process of conversion is quite noticeable.

Partly due to the demographic drop, and partly as a counter movement against the unrealistic enrolment target during the cultural revolution, Shanghai secondary schools have been facing a severe population drop. The 300,000 figure in the mid-1970s is dropping towards 50,000 in the late 1980s. Urban schools, in particular, was attacked head-on by this population drop. This came together with the economic reform mentioned above and made conversions feasible.

The Shanghai Vocational School for Tourism and Services presents a typical example. The school was converted from the original Whampao Middle School, a

school with a long history situated right in the financial centre of the city and suffered most from the demographic drop. In 1980, the school experimented with one vocational class for "dim-sum"-making [2] recruiting girls only. The reaction was extremely positive, not only in the sense that it was popular among parents and students, but also that the different divisions in the commercial sector (the commercial bureaux, the supplies divisions, the food companies, etc.) competed for joint-ventures. The next year, 1981, five classes were operated. These expanded to 12 classes in 1984. The school then was totally converted into a vocational school and was renamed in 1985. All the way, the school has been expanding (Visit and interview, W3, 1986; Chen & Wei, 1984). Other VHS's have similar experiences. This is essentially a process of re-utilising traditional "academic" schools to accomodate "non-academic" students.

This replacement process runs alongside other measures at the macro-level (Interview, 1981, B1). In 1981, Shanghai was the first in China to run separate examinations for university entrance and employment. This has successfully diverted around 30% of senior secondary graduates from the highly competitive academic

[2] "Dim-sum" is the Cantonese pronounciation and the widely accepted Western version of *dianxin* - assorted dumplings, cakes, etc.

examination. This further developed so that in 1984, 40%, and 50% in 1985, of the senior secondary graduates were admitted to higher institutions. The target is to further increase this to 67% (Interviews, L1, 1984; 1986). This has significantly reduced the examination pressure in senior secondary schools.

This, however, is achieved only with the parallel measure of providing the other students an acceptable alternative. Students make up their minds on their future not at the time when they graduate from senior secondary schools, but rather when they leave junior secondary schools. Here the VHS's play an important role. It is remarkable when one notices that very few VHS students opt to sit for higher education entrance examinations although they are allowed to.

Top-down or Bottom-up

The VHS also provides an interesting case of "bottom-up" reform in a supposedly centralised country. Although one may argue that the 1980 Document had started the whole VHS "movement", a close examination will reveal that most of the initiations come from schools and enterprises levels.

In none of the cases I have examined are there top-down initiation. It is the economic reform that opens up the whole possibility of commissioned training, and

also because of that the "consumers" of training take care of the cost-benefits. VHS's provide a rescue for both the educational and the production/service sectors. The part played by the government administration, the Vocational Education Division, is limited to co-ordinate teaching materials and syllabuses for the academic and core subjects and to carry out advisory inspections. Most of the curriculum in the practical subjects is provided by the consumer-party of the joint-venture.

Conclusion

As I have mentioned at the beginning of this paper, it is always difficult to generalise, over time and space, what one perceives in China. I have not looked into, for example, the situation in non-coastal areas where economic reform is still taking off. I have not looked into, as people usually don't, the cost-effectiveness of the VHS, which becomes crucial when there is a tendency to institutionalize all kinds of training. I have not discussed in this paper the extent the VHS can further expand, if the labour situation on the whole is still working under centralised allocation.

Nevertheless, it appears safe to argue that the recent developments in China in vocationalizing secondary education should be given some credit.

At least in the coastal areas, the VHS's have

proved themselves not only a means for training skilled manpower, but also a necessary element in speeding up the reform of breaking away from a totally planned economy.

It also argues strongly for the possibility of diverting the majority of secondary students into vocational training, not necessarily putting them into a socially inferior position. This is particularly remarkable in a country like China where the strong Confucian tradition still regards academic studies as of supreme importance.

Of course, one may sensibly argue that all these is possible in China because it is a special case where the income differentials between manual and mental labours are small. In fact, the private return for university education is somehow still negative, although it might be difficult to discern the meaning of returns to education in a non-market economy.

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